



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: April 19, 2022

Agenda Item: Implement Upper Yellowstone River Smallmouth Bass Catch, Kill, and Report Regulation (R3)

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 minutes

Background: On March 2 an angler reported catching a smallmouth bass in the upper Yellowstone River near the confluence with the Gardner River on Feb. 19. The angler provided video of the catch, and species and location of the catch were verified by National Park Service biologists and FWP. The fish was released back into the river alive by the angler.

Smallmouth bass have previously been reported near the Highway 89 Bridge (just above the confluence with the Shields River) and near the town of Emigrant. This latest report is the furthest upstream smallmouth bass have been documented. There has been a slow expansion of smallmouth bass range up the Yellowstone River, but with approximately 34 river miles from previously reported fish, this report may be a product of an unauthorized introduction rather than an expanding population pioneering upriver. Despite the mechanism of spread, smallmouth bass could substantially impact existing coldwater fisheries in the upper Yellowstone. Establishment of a viable smallmouth bass population could be possible due to the presence of multiple spring creeks, long rip rap banks, and thermal inputs in the upper river. Smallmouth bass are a predatory species, and an established population would be expected to substantially impact the native Yellowstone cutthroat population and nonnative wild sport fish.

Due to the low relative abundance of the smallmouth bass population, relying on angler harvest and mandatory reporting is a cost-effective tool to determine location and preferred habitats for smallmouth bass in the upper Yellowstone. Additionally, collection of otoliths and other tissues can provide information on origin of the fish and age and growth. Currently, mandatory catch, kill, and report regulations are in place for smallmouth bass in much of the Shields River, any walleye caught outside of the lower Clark Fork River reservoirs in Region 1, for Northern pike on Lake Mary Ronan in Region 1, and for brown trout in the Kootenai River from Libby Dam to the Idaho border in Region 1.

Public Involvement Process & Results: Since this discovery was relatively recent, there has been minimal public outreach related to this proposed action. The commission does have an Unauthorized Placement of Fish rule (12.7.15 ARM) to guide the department's response to unauthorized introductions. The proposed action falls within management action listed in rule (12.7.1503 ARM). Similar actions to unauthorized introductions of fish have generally had wide public support.

Alternatives and Analysis: The commission could adopt the proposed catch, kill, and report regulation and the department would begin public outreach. If not adopted, the department does not currently have a cost-effective alternative to remove smallmouth bass without negatively impacting the existing coldwater fishery (e.g., using electro-fishing or nets would not be expected to catch many smallmouth bass and would inadvertently capture several wild trout).

Proposed Motion: I move the commission adopt a mandatory catch, kill, and report regulation for all smallmouth bass caught in the Yellowstone River from the Yellowstone National Park boundary to Springdale Bridge FAS, and amend the Shields River smallmouth bass regulation to include the entire river.